

# Meeker County Museum

Scale 2 Inches = 1 Mile

Township 12 North Range 30 West

Principal Meridian

## at the G.A.R Hall

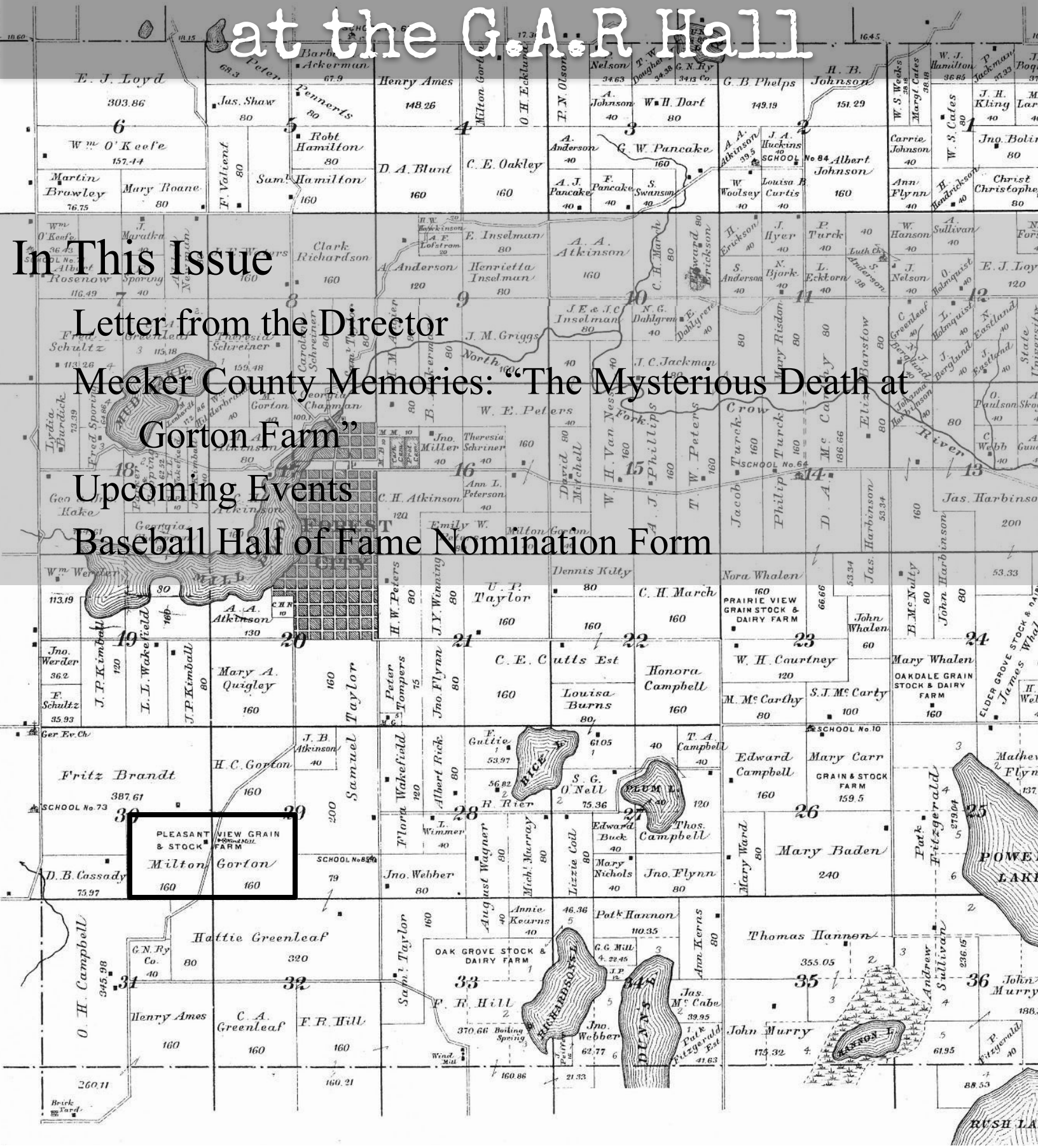
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## **Mission Statement**

To enhance, archive and preserve the Meeker County Museum, Civil War Building Complex, and it's growing collection of artifacts of local historical and genealogical significance. We also serve to provide educational programming and other means for dissemination of local historical and genealogical information for present and future generations

## **Board of Directors**

Charlie Holmquist - Sid Wilson - Bruce Nelson - Sam Feistner  
Jeff Niedenthal - Bob Bohrer - Chuck Pease - Auggie Anderson  
Barb Penk - Ken Zachman

## **Executive Director**

Bayley Schluter

## **Staff and Volunteers**

Sandy Johnson - Mark Cashman  
Connie Lies - Auggie Anderson

## **Museum Information**

Meeker County Museum at the G.A.R Hall  
308 N Marshall Ave  
Litchfield, MN 55355  
320-693-8911  
staff@meekercomuseum.org  
www.meekercomuseum.org

## **Hours and Admission (Sept - June)**

Monday: CLOSED  
Tuesday: 10am-4pm  
Wednesday: 10am-4pm  
Thursday: 10am-4pm  
Friday: 10am-4pm  
Saturday: 12pm-4pm  
Sunday: CLOSED

## **Admission & Research Library**

### *Exhibit Admission*

Adults \$3 - Children Under 12 Free - Members Free

### *Research Library*

Free access to materials  
\$0.25 per B&W copy made  
\$1.00 per Color copy made  
\$2 per Copy on large paper



# Letter from the Director

Bayley Schluter

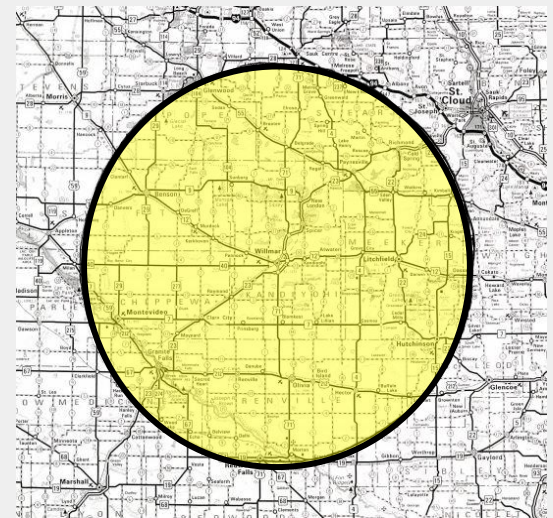


**The Players prepping for their performance**

The leaves are turning and the weather is cooling, I hate to admit it, but my favorite season is over. Summer came and went with a bang, with more than 700 people passing through our doors between Memorial Day and Labor Day. The MCM hosted a preview of the FungusAmongus Player's production of *The Man of La Mancha* and enjoyed celebrating Litchfield's 150th birthday. Staff lead several group tours through the building and hosted a booth at the Meeker County Fair, our first in some years. Thank you to anyone who volunteered for our programs or outreach events, and thank you to everyone who visited the Museum.

As the regular foot traffic decreases, staff and volunteers will begin deep-cleaning the exhibit spaces and replacing some of our displays with new topics. The artifacts inside the cases will be removed, dusted/lightly washed and surveyed for any damage. The cases themselves will be cleaned inside and out, as well as the spaces around them. If any of that interests you, feel free to express your excitement by volunteering! Anyone who wishes to volunteer with the MCM can express their interest by visiting the Museum during open hours, emailing myself directly, or through our website (<https://www.meekercomuseum.org/volunteer>). If you think you'd enjoy working with the collection, organizing the library, planning new exhibits, volunteering for an event, or anything else, don't hesitate to tell us so!

The Meeker County Museum is excited to announce that we'll be partnering with the Kandiyohi County Historical Society (KCHS) in Willmar to bring more awareness to the West Central MN Baseball Hall of Fame (HoF). The KCHS partnered with the Willmar Stingers to begin the HoF in 2014 and are seeking nominations for the 2020 class. The HoF covers a 45-mile radius of Willmar which includes the entirety of Meeker County, and we can't wait to honor our local baseball heroes. The nomination form is included with this newsletter letter and must be submitted to the KCHS via mail, email, or in-person drop off by Friday, October 25. An induction of the new class will be held in early-2020.



**The 45 mile radius that extends East towards Cokato, South toward Redwood Falls, West towards Montevideo, and North towards Sauk Centre**

December 1 will be the first day of the 2nd Annual Christmas Village. Several nonprofits and community organizations will be decorating Christmas trees to put on display throughout the Museum. Visitors will vote for their favorite tree, and the winner will receive a percentage of December's admission sales! This is a fundraiser, so everyone will be charged admission, regardless of membership status or age. The Christmas Village is a wonderful opportunity to enjoy the holidays while supporting the missions of many local organizations!

Follow us on Social Media or join our Email List to get more updates on upcoming events.

# Meeker County Memories

## *“The Mysterious Death at Gorton Farm”*

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T.A Wakefield was sitting in his Forest City home on December 31, 1901, New Years Eve. The year was coming to a close, and 1902 would soon begin with a promise of new beginnings and challenges. When Wakefield looked outside his window around 9:30 pm, his heart was immediately filled with dread. A fire, large enough to see from Wakefield's home, growing larger by the second. After quickly dressing for the freezing temperatures, Wakefield ran through his front door and toward the dirt road that would bring him closer to danger. A stranger on horseback rode on the opposite direction, passing Wakefield who could not recognize the man's face in the dark. A neighbor, Fritz Brandt, met Wakefield on the road and together they followed the light until they came upon another neighbor's driveway. Mr. and Mrs. Gorton's home was being devoured by flames, and no sign that they had escaped.

Wakefield and other neighbors attempted to find the Gorton's; looking through the front door, the main bedroom window and the front living room window. No one could find the couple, and the fire was already so extreme that attempting to put it out would only be a wasted effort. The next morning, New Years Day 1902, the bodies of Milton and Harriet Gorton were discovered in the basement of the home; having fallen through the sitting room and a stove broke through the weakened floorboards. The charred remains of the couple were identified and inspected by the Coroner, who approved a burial permit and released the remains to be buried on January 4th. Curiously enough, this is not where the story of the Gorton's ends.

Rumors of fowl play quickly swept through Forest City and the surrounding area, fueled by the fact that the Gorton's were an older, childless couple that owned enough property and livestock to be worth \$25,000. They were also known to frequently loan money to those who needed it, and kept at least \$100 cash in the home at all times (approximately \$3,000 in today's value). These were mere rumors until Meeker County Coroner H.E. Cassel announced that, upon further reflection and review of his notes, the Gortons cause of death was not the fire.

Suspensions immediately fell down on Frank Addy, a teenagened farmhand who worked for and lived with the couple. Frank was an Indiana native who came to Meeker County about four months prior. He had a brother and mother who had already been living there for about three years, but the brother left one month prior to find success in the West. Mr. Gorton had been an invalid for about twenty-five years, and suffered from frequent "fits." Addy was responsible for the farm chores and assisting Mrs. Gorton with her husband. He was in the home when it caught fire, and was the only one to escape with little to no burns on his skin. Two days after the fire, volunteers were working to clean up the wreckage when someone discovered a coat covered underneath a pile of wood. The coat had slight burns on the outside, but also several grey human hairs wound around one of the buttons. The coat was found between a divet in the ground and a wooden plank. There were also questions about a coal-oil bucket that was found near the victims. A bucket of this type was customarily kept near the kitchen stove, so how did it end up in the sitting room?

With questions that needed answers and a suspect in hand, County Attorney A.F Foster charged Frank Addy with the murder of Mr. Milton Gorton. The trial took place in Litchfield in late-March 1902. Several witnesses were called to give their testimony on what happened the night of the fire, but also to confirm the original layout of the house. The witnesses stated that, on the night of the fire, Addy was seen in the field wearing little clothing and was sent on horseback to the home of a neighbor to avoid the threat of frostbite. They also confirmed that the only possible escape

for the couple would have been through the kitchen door on the opposite side of the home from the Gorton bedroom, which would have made it more difficult to move Mr. Gorton (who weighed 200 lbs) out of the house. One man's testimony stated that a revolver was found near the couple's bodies, below the original sitting room. Those who knew the couple affirmed that they did own a revolver, but kept it inside their bedroom.

Finally, Frank Addy was called to testify. He claimed that Mr. Gorton was suffering from a fit around 8:30, and so was in the main bedroom assisting Mrs. Gorton. Harriet left the room to retrieve a second lantern from the kitchen and then returned to the bedroom. A few minutes later, Addy and Harriet smelled smoke and saw it coming through the bedroom door. They opened the door and saw smoke filling the sitting room, but coming from the enclosed kitchen. They kept the kitchen door closed and attempted to lift Milton from his bed, but was unsuccessful. Addy and Harriet then ran toward the kitchen and escaped through a side door. Finally, according to Addy's testimony, Harriet ran back into the house to rescue her husband. Addy removed his burning clothes and decided to wait outside until more help arrived. Addy was then pressed about the oil bucket and the revolver both being in the sitting room. He could not explain the bucket, but stated that Mrs. Gorton had seen some "prowlers" near the house the day before and, since Addy already slept in the sitting room, asked him to hold onto it in case there was a break in. When asked about the coat, Addy could offer no explanation to its placement, but repeatedly claimed that it did not belong to him. Following his testimony, the jury was left to deliberate whether or not Frank Addy was guilty of murdering Milton Gorton.

After a single day's discussion, the jury announced that the evidence and testimonies were too circumstantial to convict, and Frank Addy was acquitted of all charges. For the next few months, the public was left alone to gossip about what really happened that night. But then new evidence was found that brought Frank Addy back into the spotlight.

On July 26, 1902, the Litchfield Saturday Review reported that Phillip Addy had just arrived to a county jail in Minneapolis after two policemen brought him back from Idaho so that he could stand accused of the murder of Mrs. Harriet Gorton. His younger brother, Frank, was already sitting in the Litchfield jail for the same crime.

When Phillip Addy (26) first announced his plans to homestead in the West, he told close friends and neighbors that he would begin 1902 by visiting family in Indiana and then traveling to stay with another brother in Idaho. This plan contradicted the tale of two witnesses from Kimball who claimed to have been part of a horse team that was hired to carry Phillip from Litchfield to within a mile of the Gorton farm. From there, Phillip was accused of joining his brother in secret, and waiting until nightfall to set fire to the home, steal any cash, and then kill the couple.

It seemed like the suspicions of so many would finally be satisfied. The court proceedings of Phillip Addy began in early August, but fell apart that same day. The men from Kimball, seeing Phillip for the first time in the courtroom, told the prosecution during the lunch adjournment that Phillip's physical appearance did not match what they remembered of the man they drove out of Litchfield. Without any witnesses to claim that Phillip was even in Minnesota on December 31st, the case was dismissed and he was let go. The case against Frank, however, proceeded in Litchfield to no avail. Without the evidence of the brother, Frank was acquitted for a second time and finally allowed to live in peace.

So who was the man taken so close to the Gorton farm the day of the fire? Was it the same person who had spooked Mrs. Gorton the day before? Or was it all coincidence and the deaths of Milton and Harriet Gorton a tragic accident? Until more evidence is found, historians and gossipers alike can only speculate.



**The Gorton's gravestone in the Litchfield Cemetery**

# October 2019

Sun	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30	31		

October 10 at 1:30pm - Civil War Roundtable - "Key West and the Civil War"

October 15 - Meeker County Museum at the Senior Expo

October 17, 18, 19 during Open Hours - MEA Weekend & Pumpkin Scavenger Hunt at the Museum

# November 2019

Sun	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat
					1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30

November 14 at 1:30pm - Civil War Roundtable - "The Bullochs and Roosevelts: A Study of Two Families in the Civil War"

November 28 & 29 - Thanksgiving Weekend - The Museum is Closed

# December 2019

Sun	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

December 01 - First Day of the "Christmas Village" Fundraiser

December 12 at 1:30pm - Civil War Roundtable - "A Guidebook to the US/Dakota War of 1862"

December 24 - Christmas Eve - The Museum will close at 1pm

December 25 - Christmas - The Museum is Closed





Some children learning about a rotary phone at the County Fair



Stephen Osman speaking at the Litchfield GAR Civil War Roundtable

## Show your love for local history by becoming a member of the **Meeker County Museum at the G.A.R Hall**

### Membership Benefits Include

Quarterly Newsletter sent by Mail or Email - Free Admission to Annual Meeting  
Reduced Price on Museum Events - 10% Off Most Items in the Giftshop

### Meeker County Museum at the G.A.R Hall

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Email Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Numbers: \_\_\_\_\_

☐ Add Me to the Email List

#### Annual Museum Membership Levels

___ Single	\$15
___ Family (2+)	\$25
___ Supporter	\$50
___ Sustainer	\$100 - \$249
___ Advocate	\$250 - \$499
___ Visionary	\$500+

#### Business Levels

___ Annual	\$50
___ Supporter	\$100
___ Sustainer	\$250
___ Advocate	\$500
___ Benefactor	\$750
___ Visionary	\$1000



#### I Want to Be a Member of the Litchfield Civil War Roundtable

\_\_\_ \$25.00 Single Membership

\_\_\_ \$35.00 Family (2) Membership

#### Make checks payable to:

Meeker County  
Historical Society  
308 N Marshall Ave  
Litchfield, MN 55355